

# Career shock: the profound effect of COVID-19 on four Australian middle managers

*The pandemic's effects on our ways of working are widely discussed. But the impact it has had on careers has been missing from this conversation. **Steve McKenna** interviews four Australian middle managers who have had to grapple with the stress (and sometimes renewal) that the pandemic caused in their professional identities and career trajectories.*

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While we are now very familiar with some of the impacts of the pandemic on work, working and working patterns and practices, the connection to the impact on careers has been less well-documented. It seems clear, however, as we gather the stories of people in mid-career (and other stages), that the effects of the pandemic on careers have been profound. These impacts seem to relate to how the pandemic has affected specific industries, as well as the issues of changed ways of working. In this article I consider four career stories of middle managers in very different industries and how COVID-19, as a career shock, initiated a process of reflection and deliberation.

It is now well-established in the study of careers that over the course of a professional life individuals will craft a career and an identity associated with it. In doing so, they will acquire the skills, or career capital, to build a successful and sustainable career in their chosen profession, occupation and sector. When an event occurs—for example, the shock of a global pandemic—the career crafted so carefully by an individual may come under severe pressure and stress. An individual may enter a transitional space, where they may have to deal with a loss of career identity, and where the career capital that they have built up over many years to craft a successful career comes under question. Alternatively, a shock could lead to a new and reinvigorated individual, who perceives opportunities and new challenges. In short, the impact of a career shock is unique to any individual.

In interviews with four middle managers, Beth, Linda, Martin, and Peter (pseudonyms), the differential impact of COVID-19 on careers can be seen.

Beth has crafted a career in aged care and has risen to director-level in a leading provider in Western Australia. Globally, the impact of the virus has been at its most tragic in aged-care residences and has created enormous challenges for this sector. In discussing her career story, Beth highlighted the significance of her role in current conditions and how her entire career had been spent in the sector. As such, her career identity and skill set were immersed in aged care. What she had realised from the pandemic, though, was that she had more to offer across the aged-care sector. Her experience and capabilities, she now thought, could be better utilised in a consulting role and she was now determined to establish her own business. “The pandemic”, she stated, “has given me the confidence to believe in myself”. For Beth, the pandemic event had led to a positive outcome. The career she had crafted over many years and the skill set and identity she had constructed, had prepared for the ‘next level’.

Linda’s situation was very different. She had crafted a career in the luxury hotel sector. Linda had reached a regional (Asia) director level, based in Western Australia. “My career has collapsed. I used to be in luxury hospitality, I am now in the prison sector”. Here Linda was referring to the use of hotels for COVID quarantining. In addition, she noted that the sector was “dead” in Asia. For Linda, the career shock of COVID had been a nightmare, suddenly, all of her life’s work in developing a career in this sector was destroyed. “I have no idea what to do. I want to get out of the industry, but where to? My whole skill set is in luxury hotels, what is transferable?”

Martin was in medical devices. He had developed a career in sales and was now regional sales manager in Western Australia and Asia. He hated remote working. “I need to be in the office, I used to prepare myself for the office every morning, a sort of ritual”. The medical devices industry has not suffered badly through the pandemic and, Martin admitted that he could do his work from home. However, apart from hating the isolation, he found that his boss expected him to be on call 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. “It is because I am single, my boss thinks I have no life”. This perception of being unfairly treated has led to him seeking to move companies. Martin was perfectly comfortable in his work before his perception of the psychological contract he had with his employer changed.

Finally, Peter, a geologist in mining. Other than having to work remotely Peter's career had not been severely impacted by COVID. Mining had made quick and well-prepared adjustments in its operations to ensure business continuity and, while Peter enjoyed being 'in the field', there was no real need for him to be there. On a broad scale of career shock, Peter's had been of minor proportions only.

In many ways, of course, COVID-19 has caused shocks. At the level of work, many hundreds of thousands have lost jobs, seen careers ended and entered, conceptually, a transitional space. In the case of professional workers, those fortunate enough to continue in employment, the pandemic, because of its impact differentially across sectors, may have had a positive or negative experience on them. It has led to reflection, deliberation and soul-searching. In many cases it seems to have had a great impact on mental health, in others it has acted as the springboard to career regeneration. If the pandemic had not happened, it is very likely that the four managers above would have carried on with successful careers in their chosen fields. Exploring and understanding the unique responses of individuals to career shocks enables researchers better to connect agency and context in investigating the processes of crafting careers and, the nature of the impact on the career choices people make. There are many hundreds of thousands of such stories to collect.



Notes:

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